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ABSTRACT

Despite the paradigm shift from product to process-centered writing theory, the reality is that students still are offered few options and teachers continue to expect set forms of writing. What continues to count is the end product, usually an academic essay demonstrating all the virtues of mainstream literacy. To explore this charge, a survey was undertaken at Southern Illinois University's English department which revealed that these attitudes and values continue to be expressed by instructors. In grading, the final, typed product was by far the most important activity. Not surprisingly, the survey indicated that the educational system itself also values product over process. Sample responses from instructors concerning this show that this is a controversial issue among faculty. Thus, there has evolved a sort of "schizoid" pedagogy in which theory and practice do not match. Teachers, therefore, must try to balance process and product more favorably. For example, many theorists believe that the current definition of literacy is too restrictive. Such restrictions have implications which society should take a close look at. One objection to open forms which give students more room to explore is that they would result in sloppy writing, but this is not necessarily so. Neither do researchers generally favor getting rid of the academic essay completely. Instructors should consider how to make the process "count" gradewise, and try to recognize variant forms within student writing. (Nineteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Research on Writing Instruction: Confronting Ambivalence in the System

In 1980, when Winston Weathers published An Alternate Style, he claimed that, in contrast to the more playful, exploratory writing for which Larry has just surveyed the theoretical bases, what he had been taught to construct was "the well-made box" (2). Weathers argued that even though the paradigm shift from a product- to a process-centered theory was purportedly at work in our classrooms, the reality was that we still offered students few real options, that we still expected set forms, "the well-made box." Weathers recognized "an alternate style," or "grammar B," as he calls it, that values incertitude, ambiguity, and multiple perspectives that result from the creative thinking engendered by more open forms of writing. He describes this alternate tradition as a "beast sniffing outside the door," demanding our attention (8).

Shortly after Weathers' book came out, Maxine Hairston in her 4C's address also challenged composition instructors to think about where they stood in the paradigm shift. Citing Thomas Kuhn's The Nature of Scientific Revolutions, Hairston claimed that the shift was not yet complete, that we had not come to a full realization of the potential of process theory, and that there would be some parts of the earlier, current-traditional

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paradigm that would be beneficial for us to keep ("Winds of Change" 76-77+). Ann Berthoff made similar claims that we may be using the rhetoric of the paradigm shift, but what we say and what we actually do in the classroom may not match. She identified a gap between theory and practice when "freewriting" means only "getting a thesis statement," or when textbooks devote a chapter to invention then turn around and discuss the traditional modes of description, narration, comparison/contrast, etc. She saw this as inadequate or even inaccurate in making sense for the student between earlier and later stages in the composing process (75-6).

Nearly a decade after Weathers' book, in 1988 Covino charged in The Art of Wondering that we still are not recognizing process theory to its full potential. He claims that it is ironic that writing taught through process theory could yield the most imaginative, creative thinking--yet we stifle that process by our demands and valuation of product over process (128-9). We may ask students to "write to see what happens" during "pre-writing," but then we turn around and ask for a product that presents a single perspective in a closed form, the academic essay. Covino levels serious criticism:

> In even the most enlightened composition class, a class blown by the winds of change through a 'paradigm shift' into a student-centered, process-oriented environment replete with heuristics, sentence combining, workshopping, conferencing, and recursive revising, speculation and exploration remain subordinate to finishing... Work-in-process does not count as writing, at least not as writing that counts.

> What counts is ending rather than continuing the discourse. And even in the process-busy classroom, what counts, when all the prewriting and revising ends is some type of academic essay, some demonstration of all the virtues of mainstream literacy--unity, coherence, perspicuity, closure, and correctness (129).

For those of us who are working hard in our "process-busy" classrooms, these charges may be difficult to accept.

To explore the validity of these charges, I decided to field test a survey at SIU-C while a graduate teaching assistant there. The survey of SIU-C's English Department revealed that the attitudes and values expressed overall validate Covino's claims: as a group there, we do value those aspects of writing identified by mainstream literacy definitions; we do value the product over the process; and the academic essay is far and away the major (and sometimes the only) form recognized. With regard to what we value in "good" writing, 80% of us marked "coherence," "certainty," "unity," and "closure." Fewer than 1% value incertitude or ambiguity. When I asked what types of activities we involve our students in, a majority of respondents marked such activities as "freewriting," "journals," and "peer responses." Yes, we do utilize the rhetoric of process theory. Many of us are proud of our "process-busy" classrooms. But are Covino, Weathers, Berthoff, and others correct that our practices don't really match our theories? That we start in the right direction, then betray ourselves by, after all, valuing only product?

Answers to the next part of the survey provided a telling revelation: when it comes down to the GRADE, what we value does

turn out to be that final, typed product. No one, for example, gives a grade to freewriting. In fact, almost no activity or assignment receives a grade or even counts except the final papers. Although many instructors assign check marks (etc.) to early drafts, and some do include this work as part of the grade, it may be hard for students to see that we do value the process--most students see a grade as what assigns value. One respondent identified the situation this way: "Theory values the process, but we value only the product. Schizoid, isn't it!"

The survey showed Covino's claims as further warranted with respect to form--virtually everyone assigns the academic essay, some exclusively. Those people who did mark "dialogue" or "letter" as alternate forms generally meant "dialogue," as in bits of conversation in a memorable person or experience essay, and "letter," as in get-acquainted device, or exercise in audience awareness--a "not really graded" event.

The last part of my survey provided the most insight. I asked respondents what the <u>educational system</u> values more--process or product. I wanted to know if they think it is even possible to reach out into less traditional approaches to composition, or if the system itself restricts them. Respondents overwhelmingly marked that the system values product over process.

This question stimulated heavy response, indicating it is a tough issue, as well as one of great interest to teachers. Many people expressed a concern for the contradiction between theory

and practice and wished to do something about it, but cited such restrictions as having to follow departmental policies. For instance, the dominant reason for assigning the academic essay was the department expects it.

Another frequently cited concern was the department's emphasis on grades. The fact that grades are required (by the system as well as by students) was one of the major bases for concluding that the system values product over process. In fact, one respondent observed that "The whole focus seems to go on 'the grade' not even on the finished product but the grade assigned the finished product."

Another frequently cited example of the system's valuing product was the Department's demand for seven papers in 101. Time constraints make it difficult to take students through multiple drafts, yet complete seven papers. (Aside: changed to 4 now.)

Respondents were divided, however, over whether they agreed or disagreed with the system's values. One respondent stated that the system "will always value the finished product more, and it is right to do so."

More respondents disagreed with or were at least troubled by the system's values, however. One respondent charged that "[product] is <u>most used</u> by our system because it is easier to assess (grade); [it] requires less creative and skilled teaching; also [it's] easier to standardize."

This section of the survey revealed that even though many of us may see the value of process and may attempt to teach guided by this philosophy, we are simultaneously required to satisfy a system that calls for grades, a system that is guided by a definition of literacy that values only the academic essay, a form which closes rather than opens investigation and inquiry. One respondent summed up the situation:

> Unfortunately, the current educational system seems to value product over process despite all the hoopla about writing as process, reading as process, learning for life, etc. We...are victims of Hirsch's cultural literacy drive, striving for facts as representative of knowledge. We use objective (so-called) based tests to determine competency and achievement. We strive to finish textbooks by the end of the year. We want 'instant, total gratification'--who cares how we get there. The ends, not the means, are important...Coe is right--we don't teach literacy. We teach schooling.

When practice and theory work at such cross purposes, we may ultimately be ineffective. Ann Berthoff charges that

> In many instances, the language of the new rhetoric is used when there is no correspondingly new attitude towards what we are teaching, to say nothing of how we are teaching it. (75-76).

I believe this sort of "schizoid" pedagogy results when literacy definitions do not match or keep pace with composing theory. Composing theory may have undergone a paradigm shift, but at present, the academy recognizes only the traditional forms and values of mainstream literacy, as revealed at every point of my survey.

On the basis of the survey results at SIU, I have to at least consider that Covino's claims may be warranted. The

question is, how important are these claims? What are their implications, both positive and negative, and how might we more favorably balance process and product in our classrooms?

Many contemporary rhetoricians believe we must push past the current restrictive definition of literacy. If, as suggested by Keith Fort, the form of the research paradigm, the form of the essay, the form of the critical analysis, determines what will be thought (174), we must question a definition of literacy that restricts form. Zeiger claims that

> by concentrating almost exclusively on thesis support exposition in college composition classes, we are implicitly teaching that the ability to support an assertion is more important than the ability to examine an issue ...the implicit message is that <u>proving</u> is more important than <u>finding out</u> (458).

This philosophy has serious implications. At the very least, insistence upon only certain forms restricts what a writer wants to say. In a discussion of poetry, W. Ross Winterowd explains that

> the poet often feels himself caught up in the dilemma of creative cross-purposes, his sense of what he <u>wills</u> to say continually thrown off course by the demands of the form that he has chosen or that he has inadvertently let begin to develop in his poem ("Beyond Style" 217).

Weathers imagines the student lament that "much of what I wish to communicate does not seem to be expressible within the ordinary conventions of composition" (1). Donald C. Stewart echoes similar concerns that conventional forms of arrangement just are not suitable for every occasion (98).

Perhaps more serious implications are that, as Zeiger charges, "the art of thinking, the habit of quizzical reflection, the slow melding of old and new ideas, has yielded its place in the university to the calculation of immediate advantages" (457).

Once society realizes the full implications of such restrictions, Covino predicts that a sequel to articles like "Why Johnny Can't Read" and "Why Johnny Can't Write" will be "Why Johnny Can't Wonder"! ("Writing Tests" 55) There must be room for free thinking, for multiple perspectives, for "stargazing,' for the truly great contributions to be made. An Einstein, a Michelangelo, a Salk must not have decided ahead of time what it was that they would envision.

Assuming we realize--and agree upon--the seriousness of the issue, what are the reservations and problems we encounter in trying to revalue writing and in trying to reshape practice to fit theory?

One of the first objections to open forms that allow multiple perspectives is that students will use exploratory writing as an excuse for sloppy writing, a sort of "anything goes" philosophy. First of all, Covino explains that he does not propose students trade clarity for obscurity but rather to trade certainty and closure for an attitude of "thoughtful uncertainty" (Art 130). Other theorists, however, do discuss uses of chaos in writing, at least during early drafts. Berthoff finds chaos essential for the formation of ideas (76-77). Kirscht and Golson assert that some writers, those who crank out the mindless, empty

essays that say nothing, just regurgitate, must be forced to more chaotic exploration in order to "grapple with their ideas," many of them for the first time (20-21). This does not mean that the writing must remain chaotic. Berthoff says it is to our "teacherly advantage" that the mind does not like chaos (77). In fact, she sees it as more of a problem that advanced writers may come to closure too soon, thus cutting off their chances for deeper insights (77). Hairston also proposes it is necessary to force advanced writers into more chaotic thinking ("Advanced" 196-7)--they already know how to make a "quick, intellectual kill" (Moffett 140).

Following close behind that question of sloppy writing is "Do you mean we should pitch the academic essay?" None of the theorists I read suggested the annihilation of the academic essay. In a telephone interview with Covino, I discovered he teaches both expository and exploratory writing in the same semester, that he teaches students the difference between them and how each is useful. Hairston differentiates between Class II and III writing (roughly analogous to expository and exploratory) and asserts that at times, formula writing is necessary ("Different" 444-5). Kinneavy in A Theory of Discourse defines "expository" as writing that begins with an assertion followed by proof and "exploratory" as beginning with questions and then offering tentative responses. One is not valued over the other; rather exploratory is seen as the necessary state of inquiry to precede expository, or conclusive, writing (100). Zeiger

envisions a composition program that values each of these discourses equally, perhaps in a two-semester sequence, exploratory then expository (460).

A third question centers around how to make the process "count," at least so that students see we value it. In the telephone interview, Covino said he makes the process "count" by giving a grade for "thick folders of invention" and not just a grade on final essays. He says he can tell by the amount and kind of writing students do in exploratory stages just how "engaged" they are in the writing process. Covino also mentions that new evaluation criteria must be developed when we assign more exploratory forms ("Grammar" 16-18).

A further implication concerns our ability to recognize variant forms when we see them in student writing. In a survey of freshman writing instructors, Richard Haswell noted that a primary complaint was that students knew how to use only one predominant form--the five-paragraph essay (402). When Haswell, in turn, analyzed in-class essays written by freshmen during the first week of class, he discovered as many as 14 different organizational patterns (402). As illustrated by our introductory activity with the playing cards, we must train ourselves to see what is actually there, instead of what we expect to be there. In order to recognize students' organizational patterns, it may be that we must, in the words of Lee Odell (1986 CCCC address), develop a "hermeneutic relationship" with our students. Professors and students must

become part of a hermeneutic circle, an on-going dialogue in the development of meaning and understanding between reader and writer (396).

Besides recognizing the importance of these ideas (and perhaps altering our attitudes and philosophies) and being aware that we must train ourselves to re-see student writing (re: Haswell study), there are ways of engendering an attitude of wonder in our students, of allowing them to explore ideas, of valuing process and putting it in a better balance with product--even within the system.

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